Executive Summary

Since the eruption of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Lebanon has hosted around 1.2 million refugees, mostly in the peripheral and most vulnerable areas of the country. Local authorities have been at the forefront of the refugee crisis, juggling available means to maintain a basic level of services while managing economic, social and environmental challenges.

The gridlock of Lebanon’s central government continues to place the burden of service delivery onto local authorities, both municipalities and unions of municipalities. They must now provide for the needs of twice as many inhabitants while drawing on the same, largely insufficient, resources they had before the refugee influx. As such, the international donor community has sought to provide additional resources through programme funding and in-kind support to local authorities.

This report provides an empirical snapshot of the landscape of local governance in Lebanon from the perspective of unions of municipalities. Based on a capacity mapping and survey of 86 percent of Lebanon’s municipal unions, it also highlights entry points for national and international actors to support local authorities and host communities to address the repercussions of the Syrian conflict, including the enormous socio-economic burden that the refugee crisis has placed on local communities. Approximately 85 percent of Syrian refugees reside within Lebanese communities, both urban and rural, placing a strain on job markets and the provision of essential services.

Municipal unions were established to spearhead collective projects, programmes and investments that address the development and planning needs of their territories. In practice, unions struggle to realise this mandate. For example, two-thirds of unions have not yet developed an urban masterplan, although most of them have said they were committed to a strategic vision or some form of planning.

This can be partly attributed to unions’ lack of resources and in-house expertise, but also the lack of guidance from the line ministries and national governmental agencies, as well as bureaucratic hurdles. As a result, unions tend to over-rely on uncoordinated aid money to hire external experts and consultants to perform ad-hoc planning functions.

* This publication is a shortened version of an analysis written by André Sleiman in 2017, based on a capacity mapping survey of Lebanon’s municipal unions. The survey was conducted in the framework of the Local Government Resilience Programme (LOGOREP), implemented between 2016 and 2018 by VNG International (VNGI) in assignment of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The full text of the findings can be found under the following link: https://www.logorep.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Lebanon-Federation-of-Municipalities-Capacity-Mapping-Study.pdf.
Due to their weak administrative bodies and scarce financial and human resources, municipal unions face considerable challenges in managing refugee presence and delivering basic public services to their citizens in terms of security, solid waste management, WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene), energy, and infrastructure.

Most unions struggle to maintain a basic institutional capacity. According to the survey, 41 percent of unions do not have a formalised administrative structure, such as an organisational chart defining functions and responsibilities, as required by law, or they lack bylaws and internal procedures.

Unions also lack the core administrative units required by law; 22 percent of them do not have administrative and financial departments while 37 percent function without an engineering department. Without these, unions cannot fulfil their developmental objectives in a systematic and accountable way.

Endemic understaffing poses another impediment to unions, with 71 percent reporting that they need a larger workforce. Unions also lack specialised departments and staff with advanced technical skills; only 13 percent of unions’ workforces across Lebanon specialise or work in public health, environment, waste management, social policy and strategic planning. Without these specialised skills, the work of the unions remains confined to expediting routine administrative tasks and basic public functions rather than playing a strong leadership role in local economic and urban development. However, most of the existing workforce are young and educated; 75 percent of civil servants are below the age of 40 and 41 percent have higher education. More than half of the union presidents view their staff as skilled in their area of specialty and one third see them as taking initiatives. Thus, there is reason to be optimistic that unions could be receptive to new technology and learning skills.

A scarcity of financial resources was highlighted by 74 percent of unions as their primary weakness and main hindrance for developing their technical, administrative and planning capacities. Many unions were reluctant to disclose their financial data, which is perceived as “sensitive” information, even if the law mandates the transparent sharing of financial data. Unions are unable to fulfil their planning function because of their heavy dependence on the central government-controlled equalisation payments of the Independent Municipal Fund (IMF).

Despite these constraints, surveyed unions voiced optimism over their internal cohesion and cooperation between their member municipalities. This factor can be attributed to a sense of territorial unity transcending traditional political and tribal cleavages within and between the villages composing a union. It is also a clear acknowledgement of the democratic legitimacy and policy-making responsibility of unions over their territory.

Moving Forward: Recommendations

Unions should be provided with the necessary assistance and expertise to plan and develop their own solutions. Unions need to be strengthened with coordinated and sustained capacity building to proactively handle foreign donor funding and assistance programmes, instead of being passive recipients of aid.

For this capacity building to succeed, unions must take measures to improve their internal systems. They must integrate information and computer technology (ICT) as well as a Geographic Information System (GIS) into their work to prepare the grounds for e-governance and enhance transparency. At the same time, unions need to start formalising internal processes and formulating development plans for existing staff. They can also tap the potential of their constituencies and mobilise talent through specialised citizen committees to provide advice and participate in the design and implementation of regional plans.

In parallel, efforts are needed to create a more enabling legal and regulatory framework at the national level, either through a revision of the current municipal framework and/or the enactment of the 2014 Administrative Decentralisation Bill, still being discussed in the Parliamentary Subcommittee on Decentralisation. Local authorities can benefit from economies of scales, perhaps through incentives for municipal mergers, and consolidated mechanisms for pooling the resources of member municipalities. As such, the institutional mechanisms governing municipal finance must be improved, if not amended, to enable financial planning. Also, fairness, timeliness and transparency of IMF transfers to unions must be ensured.

Finally, decentralised local governance requires a smooth working relationship with central government entities, particularly the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (MoIM), the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) and the Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform (OMSAR). Unions should also improve cooperation with civil society organisations and their member municipalities.

National and international stakeholders must therefore seek to formulate programmes that improve national policies and regulatory frameworks and push for clarification of the mandates of the competent institutions involved at the different tiers of government.

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1. Background and Methodology

This report presents the findings of an assessment survey conducted between November 2016 and April 2017. The survey draws on a sample of 49 out of the then-56 unions in Lebanon, representing 86 percent of Lebanon’s municipal unions. These unions agreed to take part in the survey following an official endorsement from the MoIM.

Surveyor teams were deployed in the field to interview elected local officials (presidents and council members of municipal unions) as well as staff members. The assessment aimed to map the institutional capacity of municipal unions considering material, financial, administrative and staffing conditions, planning and implementation capacities, and surrounding factors (geography, demography). As such, the assessment focused on effectiveness as the key attribute to good governance, downplaying other attributes, e. g. responsiveness to peoples’ needs in the different sectoral areas.

The survey collected data through a questionnaire divided into the following themes:

- Creation and membership size of the municipal union
- Geographic data
- Demographic data
- Number of residential and non-residential units
- Headquarters and available equipment
- Financial resources
- Master Plan, Emergency Preparedness, Project Management Skills
- Projects conducted in the past five years and cooperation partners
- Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) Analysis

Most sources of data, such as resident population, number of refugees before and after the war in Syria, annual budgets, financial balance statements, qualifications and age structure of staff, are declarative and depend on the accuracy of the information or the estimation provided by the interviewees.

The analysis of the financial capacity of unions builds on revenue and expenditure data from 2013 to 2015. Some of the financial data collected in the survey was self-reported, including estimations from respondents, which can be intentionally and unintentionally imprecise. The survey also retrieved information from primary sources such as archived documents, which can be considered reliable.

When an interview with the head of a union proved impossible, the surveyors’ teams were redirected to a staff member whose varying degrees of knowledge were sometimes reflected in random estimations and answers as well as inability or refusal to answer.

Taking into consideration these limitations, the survey results should be read as capturing trends and perceptions.
How Resilient Are Lebanese Municipal Unions?

The number of municipal unions has rapidly increased since 2000, with now 75 percent of Lebanon’s municipalities grouped under the banner of unions. This shows their increased relevance and presents an opportunity for residents, the central government and international donor organisations alike to achieve development goals at the local level.

The formation of unions of municipalities was first authorised in 1977, with the adoption of the Municipal Act. During the civil war (1975–1990), ten unions were established. The emergence of unions amid the Lebanese civil war and failures of the state points to these unions’ functional flexibility and ability to pool resources and drive local development when municipalities were rendered inactive due to the conflict. While half of the Unions formed between 1975 and 1990 were in the Mount-Lebanon governorate, long considered a relatively privileged area, the other half emerged in peripheral, under-developed areas.

No unions were established from the end of the war until 1998, when the first municipal elections were held since 1963. These elections and the restoration of local government activity ushered in a boom of union formation. 73.5 percent of Lebanon’s unions have been formed since 2000 (Fig. 1).

The proliferation of unions comes in parallel with the rapid growth of municipalities in Lebanon, from around 600 in the early 1990s to over 1,000 at present. The increased number of municipalities offers local communities in the peripheral areas of Lebanon greater autonomy in meeting local needs through democratically elected councils.

However, this trend has also witnessed the formation of smaller and weaker municipalities unable to fulfil their original purpose, prompting the establishment of unions to aggregate their resources.

The surveyed unions host approximately 2.5 million permanent residents, representing around 65 percent of Lebanon’s population. They also host seasonal residents amounting to approximately 800,000 people. As such, three-quarters of Lebanon’s population rely on development projects and public services provided by the unions. The above figures do not include the estimated 1.2 million refugees from Syria, who add to the responsibilities of local government authorities.

Determining the precise breakdown of the Syrian refugee population across unions has proven difficult. In the absence of a census mechanism at the municipal level, unions provided estimations on the increase of the Syrian population that do not necessarily reflect reality on the ground (Fig. 2).

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2 Given that the 49 unions in the sample comprise 658 out of 1,038 municipalities, an extrapolation indicates that today’s 58 unions would comprise 75% of the municipalities in the country (779 in total).

3 See DRI’s publications: Reforming Decentralisation in Lebanon (April 2017) and Public Service Provision in Municipal Unions (December 2017).
Estimates provided by the unions should be treated with caution for several reasons, including mix-ups regarding population sizes in the administrative area of a union and the geographic area surrounding it. Also, unions often exaggerate refugee numbers to attract greater foreign aid. While the aggregate thirteen-fold increase in Syrian population declared by the unions is unlikely, a seven to ten-fold increase is more plausible depending on the region.

Most refugees are present in the peripheral regions of Lebanon along Syria’s border, which are traditionally the most marginalised and poverty-stricken areas of the country. These include Akkar and the poverty belt around Tripoli, Al-Fayhaa’, Dannieh and the Beqaa region.

This sudden demographic change poses a prominent challenge to the capacities of unions, which must provide increased services without an equivalent rise in a tax base. Also, population growth has generated more solid waste and untreated used water, straining the solid waste management capacities of unions. Moreover, refugees have settled in agricultural areas, in tents or informal settlements, straining land use. Many rural localities have transformed into quasi-urban agglomerations in an anarchic manner devoid of urban planning.
3. Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) Analysis

As part of the capacity mapping survey, union presidents were queried on their views on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) to their unions. Union presidents identified only 22 opportunities, as opposed to 96 weaknesses, 90 strengths and 79 threats (Fig. 3). This reveals that elected local officials perceive more internal and external limitations than opportunities to resolve the challenges they face.

Internal cohesion and cooperation between the member municipalities of unions was the most cited strength (Fig. 4). The multi-sectarian character of many unions is largely acknowledged as an asset rather than an impediment to local development. Sectarian diversity ranks third among the opportunities identified by elected officials in the SWOT analysis.

Municipalities making up unions enjoy a spirit of solidarity and common commitment to developmental goals between their member municipalities, according to union presidents. This sense of unity has a direct impact on governance: decisions are made and carried out quicker at the levels of the union and the member municipalities. They are often taken by unanimity, which signals openness and good will on the part of municipal officials, across all regions, to develop and nurture partnerships and joint projects in the interest of their community.
Lack of material resources was the most common weakness voiced by unions (Fig. 5). According to the survey results, if unions had the opportunity to procure equipment, they would prefer to acquire equipment to execute routine infrastructure and maintenance work. They show far less interest in e-governance and acquiring equipment to help digitise their operations. For example, only 10 percent of unions use a Geographic Information System (GIS), an essential tool for town and land-use planning, zoning and tax collection.

Among the external threats and challenges identified in the SWOT analysis, solid waste and wastewater management were the most prevalent, followed by the population spike from the influx of refugees from Syria (Fig. 7). At the level of internal governance, bureaucratic hurdles, outdated systems and a lack of institutional backstopping by the line ministries were identified as challenges.

Elected municipal officials harbour great hope in the support of donor agencies and programmes, according to the SWOT analysis (Fig. 6). Interestingly, international cooperation was not mentioned as a strength, despite it being an increasing phenomenon since the beginning of the Syrian war.
4. Capacities of Municipal Unions: A Breakdown

The institutional capacity (human and financial resources, physical and material assets) of municipal unions determines their ability to provide effective public service delivery and achieve developmental objectives in a systematic and accountable way. These survey results offer a lens into the institutional performance and capacity gaps, as well as opportunities for strategic planning at the union level to improve local governance. Although largely focusing on administrative capacities, the findings also provide an insight into interactive aspects of good governance, such as transparency and citizen participation, and sectoral aspects of service provision.

4.1 Material Needs of Unions

In terms of material needs, unions have expressed interest in equipment for basic infrastructure work, while showing far less interest in e-governance and digitisation.

Although all unions are equipped with computers, the use of computers is not mainstreamed in the work of the municipal administration. Computer stations remain stand-alone and are rarely integrated into a central server, intranet, IT or data management system. For instance, unions said they use email, but there is little evidence they operate through institutionalised intranet email systems. Typically, mayors and councillors resort to using their private email addresses, those of their assistants, or even their relatives, for municipal work. Email usage remains sporadic because elected local officials and municipal civil servants view it as an “unofficial way of working”. As such, official correspondence and administrative services are still processed in hard copy, mostly through fax and hand-delivered mail. There are exceptions to this trend, such as the Union of Jezzine, where intranet and email are integral parts of the work routine.

In light of this low level of digitalisation, which comes amid an absence of a legal framework for e-governance, it is understandable that only 10 percent of unions use GIS, an essential tool for land-use planning, zoning, tax collection and overall monitoring of municipal areas, especially that pen-and-paper administration is more conducive to error and corruption. Only 6 percent of unions consider GIS as needed equipment. Despite the efficiency of open-source GIS software as a workable solution for weaker unions, union officials often cite its costliness as an argument against its introduction. This could signal a lack awareness of the practical advantages of GIS or a reluctance to shift to digital governance. Transitioning to digital governance is therefore of prime importance to strengthen government accountability and transparency.

Unions queried in the survey expressed little interest in improving internal management systems and e-governance. Instead, they almost exclusively said they wanted equipment for basic infrastructure work, such as lorries, police cars, and ambulances (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equipment Item</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lorries</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction lorries, incl. bulldozers, excavators, cranes, road rollers</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waste lorries, road cleaner</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sewage maintenance truck</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Water lorry</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vehicles</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police car</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ambulance, rescue vehicle</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>4x4 service car</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fire engines</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office supplies and appliances</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waste containers</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GIS</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>142</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Most unions do not own their headquarters, posing a major impediment to their sustainability and a risk to their functioning. Half of them rent their offices, while 8 percent borrow rent-free and another 8 percent are hosted by a third-party, usually the largest municipality in the union (Fig. 8). In the latter case, it is often difficult to delineate between the activities of the union and those of the municipality hosting it, especially since they are often chaired by the same person.

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4 The e-governance law was issued after the survey was conducted (Law No. 18, issued on 10 October 2018).

5 In one case, the union premises are transitionally hosted by a private company owned by the union president.
4.2 Organisational Structures of Unions

Unions do not have enough departments to conduct routine tasks. They also lack basic bureaucratic infrastructure.

The survey results reveal a remarkable absence of legally required departments within unions’ administrations, impacting their ability to administer human resources and provide services. According to the Municipal Act, unions are composed of a policy-making body, represented by the union council, and an executive body, represented by the union administration. By law, the executive consists of finance, administrative, engineering and health, and police departments as well as a chief administrator serving as a link between the policy-making and executive branches. Both branches are chaired by the union president.

Despite these regulations, 22 percent of unions lack administrative and financial departments, while 37 percent of them function without an engineering department. This trend signals that roughly a fifth of unions struggle to perform routine bureaucratic tasks and that a third do not have the capacity to take a lead role in urban planning.

Unions are also required by law to have organisational charts that set forth the relationships between these different departments and provide clear lines of reporting. The survey shows that only 59 percent of Lebanon’s unions have an organisational chart, revealing the wide-spread absence of basic bureaucratic infrastructure in unions (Fig. 9). This trend also signals the absence of internal bylaws and standard operating procedures (SOPs) to regulate the activities of these units, without which local authorities are unable to fulfil their developmental objectives in a systematic and accountable manner.
The existence of organisational charts is linked to the lifespan and financial resources of the unions. All unions founded before 2005 have organisational charts, compared to only half of the unions created since then. In Akkar, where unions are a recent phenomenon, 87.5 percent of them do not have one.

The adoption of an organisational chart also presupposes that the union has the capacity to recruit civil servants on a full-time basis with all the social benefits that their employment entails. Financially weaker unions tend to avoid such financial commitments and favour contractual workers paid on a daily or monthly basis.

Bureaucratic bottlenecks also impede the adoption of organisational charts. By law, such charts are subject to approval by the MoIM, which can be a lengthy process. The MoIM’s Directorate General for Local Administrations and Councils, which authorises organisational charts, is chronically understaffed and responsible for more than a thousand local authorities.

Despite these constraints, the union council, which is legally responsible for adopting bureaucratic structures, could adopt organisational charts in a batch-by-batch manner to gradually build the structure of the union during its six-year mandate.
4.3 Human Resources of Unions

Unions across Lebanon suffer from endemic understaffing, with most of their workforce dedicated to self-administration and delivering only basic services. In a positive trend, though, unions have a young and educated workforce whose abilities are appreciated by most union presidents.

A large majority of surveyed unions, 71 percent, feel they are understaffed (Table 2). But a larger staff does not imply a higher satisfaction with staffing levels. For instance, unions in Mount-Lebanon and North-Lebanon, which have the highest average number of staff, are the most dissatisfied with their staffing levels. This could mean that higher staffing levels reflect greater institutional needs of unions. On the other hand, the dissatisfaction rate may simply be the result of higher ambitions and expectations of local elected officials.

Endemic understaffing is partly caused by the financial burden induced by permanent staff members, who are entitled to social security, benefits and compensations. As such, unions resort to hiring fixed-term individual contractors remunerated on a daily, monthly, or ad hoc basis (Fig. 10).

Bureaucratic hurdles also pose an obstacle to recruitment. The hiring procedure for municipal civil servants is lengthy, taking up to one-and-a-half to three years because of the backlog at supervising government agencies. It is therefore unsurprising that the older a union, the closer its staffing level to the national average.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governorate</th>
<th>Beqaa</th>
<th>Baalback-Hermel</th>
<th>Nabatiyeh</th>
<th>South-Lebanon</th>
<th>Mount-Lebanon</th>
<th>Akkar</th>
<th>North-Lebanon</th>
<th>National Average</th>
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<td>49</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10. Employment Type in Municipal Unions
According to the survey, there is an average of 8 staff members per union, an extremely low number. This figure does not differentiate between civil servants hired on permanent and fixed-term contracts. As some respondents may not have counted fixed-term, unskilled employees, the actual number of staff members could be higher than that declared by the unions.

The composition of the unions’ workforce shows that unions are mostly active in self-administration, public safety and conducting basic public works (Table 3). Specialised technical skills crucial for public service provision, such as urban planning, health and environment are rare. Skilled positions, such as engineering, health and social affairs, appear at the bottom of unions’ staff members, making up only 13 percent of the workforce. Without these advanced technical skills, unions are limited to fulfilling routine administrative tasks and basic works, instead of taking on a leading role in boosting development.

On the other side of the spectrum, security ranks as the most-staffed position in the unions, with approximately 39 percent of employees. Unions in the Beqaa governorate are heavily staffed with security personnel, who make up 73 percent of their employees, followed by those in Akkar, with 65 percent. There is a possible correlation between these high percentages and the security risks in the Beqaa and Akkar, however the Baalback-Hermel region has similar security risks and only 15 percent of its unions’ staff members work in security.

Surveyed unions expressed needs for more staff members with administration and engineering-related skills, while security personnel were the third most demanded need. This reinforced that unions are struggling to carry out their basic responsibilities.

The expressed need for specialised technical expertise in fields like strategic planning (only requested by the Union of Hermel), local development, project management, environmental management, public health and data management was particularly low.

It is striking that most of the staffing needs emanate from Akkar, 45 percent, where unions are requesting more staff members in all categories. This is consistent with the apparent institutional weaknesses in Akkar, which has the lowest staffing average, and where all unions deem their staffing level insufficient.

In terms of gender, most union staff members are men, making up 79 percent of the workforce (Fig. 11). This trend is consistent with the gender structure of the Lebanese labour force, 25 percent of which includes women, according to a 2017 World Bank survey. The nature of the unions’ staffing structure may explain why municipal employment is more male dominated than other sectors. Men are typically predominant in jobs culturally associated with the male force in Lebanon (security, engineering and unskilled labour), which make up most of the union’s workforce. Women are typically more present in the finance, administration, health and social affairs fields, which represent only 30 percent of unions’ staff.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Category</th>
<th>Governorate</th>
<th>Beqaa</th>
<th>Baalback-Hermel</th>
<th>Nabatiyé</th>
<th>South-Lebanon</th>
<th>Mount-Lebanon</th>
<th>Akkar</th>
<th>North-Lebanon</th>
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<th>%</th>
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<td>66</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>392</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Agricultural or civil engineers, topographers etc.

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On a positive side, most of the workforce in the municipal unions is young, 75 percent of the civil servants are below the age of 40. Young staff are generally more receptive to change and eager to gain skills through mentoring and capacity development. This opportunity is bolstered by available data showing that 71 percent of union employees have a high school or higher education degree. Most of these civil servants, 73 percent, have degrees related to core administrative tasks, such as business management, or engineering-related tasks, such as topography and architecture (Table 4). Few employees appear to have specific technical qualifications, such as in waste management, finance and social policy. This data reflects a dynamic workforce that is open to new technologies and new ways of working.

The low number of fixed-term engineers hired by the unions reflects endemic staffing weaknesses (Table 5). Even for a function as fundamental as engineering, personnel are mostly hired on temporary contracts, which compromises the sustainability of engineering departments.

Almost two-thirds of surveyed union presidents, 64 percent, are confident in the abilities of their staff to perform their tasks, while 10 percent of them labelled their employees as being below the needed skill level (Fig. 13).

Given the relatively high professional potential of the surveyed staff members, specialised training could serve as an incentive for improving work conditions of local civil servants. Training needs focused on core administrative tasks, such as project cycle management, planning, IT, accounting, financial planning and reporting (Fig. 12). However, 30 out of the 49 surveyed municipal unions did not voice any training need.

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7 43 of the union presidents did not provide an answer when asked about the education level of their staff.
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4.4 Financial Capacity of Unions

Achieving financial stability is the main stumbling block for unions. Overall, the unions’ expenditure structure is balanced but their overall financial capacity remains modest. The lack of resources ranks the highest, by far, among the weaknesses expressed by unions (Fig. 14). Eighty-five percent of surveyed unions highlighted this problem, expressing that their financial situation curtailed their ability to conduct development projects, hire competent workers and develop their organisational structure.

Most surveyed union presidents said that revenues did not cover their basic expenditures, such as operating costs and routine infrastructure work, limiting their ability to deliver public services and invest in larger-scale projects.

The financial stability of unions does not appear to depend on their age, but rather on the size of their assets, and structural characteristics (detailed below) as well as good governance and cost efficiency. By law, unions dispose of the following revenue sources to carry out their duties:

- Ten percent of the revenues of each member municipality
- Union’s share from the central government’s IMF
- Revenues from union’s assets and properties
- Financial aids and loans
- Donations
- Profits from union projects in which member municipalities are shareholders
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Total Revenues</th>
<th>Average Revenues by Union</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beqaa</td>
<td>9.52</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baalback-Hermel</td>
<td>13.79</td>
<td>1.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nabatiyé</td>
<td>21.50</td>
<td>3.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South-Lebanon</td>
<td>10.44</td>
<td>2.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount-Lebanon</td>
<td>36.25</td>
<td>3.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akkar</td>
<td>13.67</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North-Lebanon</td>
<td>26.83</td>
<td>4.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Average</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Table 11**

Figure 15—Revenues of the Municipal Unions for the Years 2013–2015 (in billion LBP)

Beqaa | Baalback-Hermel | Nabatiyé | South-Lebanon | Mount-Lebanon | Akkar | North-Lebanon | National Average
---|----------------|---------|---------------|---------------|------|---------------|-------------------

**Figure 14. Assessment of the Financial Capacity of Municipal Unions according to their Presidents**

- No Answer
- Revenues cover a great deal of development activities
- Revenues cover reasonable development activities
- Revenues cover basic expenses and basic development activities
- Revenues cover basic expenses
- Revenues do not cover basic expenses

**Figure 15. Revenues of the Municipal Unions for the Years 2013–2015 (in billion LBP)**
The financial strength of municipal unions is partly influenced by that of their member municipalities. According to the Municipal Act of 1977, member municipalities must pay their unions an annual contribution of 10 percent of their total revenues from their previous year.

In theory, built real estate units are an essential indicator for municipalities’ taxable resources and their contributions to unions. While municipalities are entitled to collect 36 kinds of taxes, more than 80 percent of their revenues comes from taxes on residential and commercial real estate, sewers and pavements as well as building permits. As such, the financial health of municipalities is based on the real estate sector, which is often more developed in urban areas than rural ones.

According to the survey, the highest numbers of built units are in Mount-Lebanon, particularly in the highly urbanised Greater Beirut Area and in the governorates of Akkar and North-Lebanon, particularly in and around Tripoli, Lebanon’s second largest city (Table 6).

Two factors contribute to this lack of direct correlation. Municipalities have weak legal recourses to hold tax evaders accountable and lack the human resources to collect taxes. As a result, mayors resort to seeking compromises with taxpayers, or refrain from collecting taxes from residents or entire neighbourhoods.

Likewise, unions lack the legal means to claim their dues if member municipalities do not contribute. Suspending or cancelling the membership of a non-contributing municipality is rarely a practical or beneficial option. Hence the demand, commonly voiced by union presidents, to amend the Municipal Act so that unions could collect their dues from the IMF share of member municipalities.

Table 6. Number of Residential and Non-Residential Units within the Area of the Surveyed Municipal Unions vs. Total Contributions to the Unions’ Budget from their Member Municipalities 2013–2015 (in billion LBP)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governorate</th>
<th>Type of Built Unit</th>
<th>Residential</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Non-Residential</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>No. Unions</th>
<th>Total Contributions</th>
<th>Average Contribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beqaa</td>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>48,700</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3,081</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baalback-Hermel</td>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>28,000</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3,419</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nabatiyé</td>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>63,747</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3,704</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.994</td>
<td>0.285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akkar</td>
<td>Undetermined</td>
<td>Undetermined</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Undetermined</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.229</td>
<td>0.523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North-Lebanon</td>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>100,897</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4,660</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.336</td>
<td>0.894</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>570,552</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>27,660</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>14.864</td>
<td>0.303</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Unions obtain most of their revenue from their share of the IMF, with a cumulative 76,911 million LBP collected by 49 surveyed Unions between 2013 and 2015 (Fig. 15). Due to the inaccuracy of data regarding South-Lebanon, it is impossible to determine what percentage of total revenues these funds make up, but previous research has determined it to be as high as 70 percent.\(^8\)

There are considerable discrepancies between the official formula determining the size of the IMF’s share allocated to each union and the actual amount of funds that are distributed.\(^9\) Contrary to the law, the share is decided by the Ministry of Finance and the MoIM, 40 percent based on the number of member municipalities and 60 percent on the size of their registered population (which is not necessarily the actual number of residents). Hence, the IMF’s share is often subject to political bargaining. In addition, despite the law prohibiting the use of the Fund for non-municipal matters, the central government commonly draws from it to compensate the state’s budget deficit.

The average IMF share per union is generally close to the national average, except for the lower amount for those in the Akkar governorate and the higher amount for those in North-Lebanon, which hosts Lebanon’s second-most populated city, Tripoli (Fig. 16).

The average amount of other revenues accrued by unions is around 690 million LBP. These revenues are based on three main factors:

- Profitability of a union’s assets and properties
- Ability of a union to attract financial aid and loan agreements, which are rarely approved by the central government
- Profitability of the common projects executed by a union in which member municipalities are shareholders

According to the survey, unions in the Nabatiyé and South-Lebanon governorates had the highest average revenues from international development aid, while numbers were noticeably below the national average in the Beqaa and Akkar governorates, which host high numbers of refugees. As such, the survey did not reflect the considerable inflow of foreign aid to vulnerable peripheral areas of Lebanon most affected by the refugee crisis. This discrepancy may be due to inaccurate financial valuations provided by the survey’s respondents to circumvent the central government’s tight restrictions on foreign donations and aids.

The survey examined four main types of expenditures by unions, including infrastructure and development, cleanliness and waste management, operations and administration as well as social aid and contributions to cultural events and civil society.

The expenditure structures of unions are more linked to their management and methods of governance styles, including cost efficiency, than to their population or total revenue size. Unions’ overall spending allocations are balanced and the ratio of institutional costs (administration and salaries) vs. project-related costs are in line with acceptable budgeting standards (Fig. 17-18).

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Figure 16. Unions’ IMF Share 2013–2015 (in billion LBP)

Figure 17. Spending Structure of Municipal Unions 2013–2015
How Resilient Are Lebanese Municipal Unions?

Average Staffing Levels:
- Beqaa: Average Staffing Level = 9.4
- Baalbeck-Hermel: Average Staffing Level = 4.7
- Nabatiyé: Average Staffing Level = 8.4
- South-Lebanon: Average Staffing Level = 6.5
- Mount-Lebanon: Average Staffing Level = 10.9
- Akkar: Average Staffing Level = 4.6
- North-Lebanon: Average Staffing Level = 10.3
- National Average: Average Staffing Level = 8

Average Revenue by Union:
- Infrastructure: 27.938 billion LBP (32%)
- Cleanliness: 25.384 billion LBP (30%)
- Administration: 24.216 billion LBP (29%)
- Aid: 4.764 billion LBP (6%)
- Other: 2.425 billion LBP (3%)

Total Expenditures: 84.728 billion LBP

Figure 18. Total Spending Structure of Municipal Unions 2013–2015

Figure 19. Administrative Costs vs. Staffing Levels and Revenue Size in Municipal Unions 2013–2015 (in billion LBP)
Cleanliness-related expenditures, which typically comprise spending on solid waste and wastewater management, are mainly affected by the cost-efficiency of unions’ management. Such spending represents on average 30 percent of the total budgets of the unions (Table 7). In many cases, unions do not invest in these sectors, leaving them at the discretion of member municipalities. The survey reveals no conclusive correlation between population or revenue size with spending on cleanliness.

As a rule, the higher the government’s spending on infrastructure, development projects and public facilities in relation to administrative costs, the more efficient it is. In Lebanon, such spending makes up almost a third of the unions’ budget, which is a positive indicator. There is no conclusive correlation between such spending and the population or revenue size of a union. Instead, infrastructure spending depends, for the most part, on the Union’s strategic planning and activity level.

By law, unions are entitled to provide social assistance, contribute to cultural events and support local civil society organisations. They spend approximately nine percent of their expenditures on such activities, an acceptable amount. There is no direct correlation between aid expenditures and their population or total revenue size.

Overall, unions’ spending is modest relative to the extent of their development needs. For instance, total infrastructure expenditure by the unions was 27.938 billion LBP (18.6 million USD) between 2013 and 2015, which is a small sum.

### Table 7. Cleanliness- and Infrastructure-related Expenditures vs. Population and Revenue Size 2013–2015 (in billion LBP)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governorate</th>
<th>Beqaa</th>
<th>Baalback-Hermel</th>
<th>Nabatiyé</th>
<th>South-Lebanon</th>
<th>Mount-Lebanon</th>
<th>Akkar</th>
<th>North-Lebanon</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>253,354</td>
<td>84,910</td>
<td>32,661</td>
<td>88,500</td>
<td>80,000</td>
<td>198,000</td>
<td>255,000</td>
<td>959,764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average spending on cleanliness</td>
<td>0.248</td>
<td>0.244</td>
<td>0.754</td>
<td>0.890</td>
<td>0.312</td>
<td>0.540</td>
<td>0.944</td>
<td>0.518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average spending on infrastructure</td>
<td>0.685</td>
<td>0.355</td>
<td>0.578</td>
<td>0.819</td>
<td>0.389</td>
<td>0.546</td>
<td>0.846</td>
<td>0.570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average revenues by union</td>
<td>1.360</td>
<td>1.970</td>
<td>3.071</td>
<td>2.611</td>
<td>3.625</td>
<td>1.708</td>
<td>4.472</td>
<td>2.694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average revenues from foreign aid</td>
<td>0.648</td>
<td>0.492</td>
<td>0.676</td>
<td>0.684</td>
<td>0.141</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>0.616</td>
<td>0.337</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.5 Planning and Project Management in Unions

As the number and size of unions has grown, so has their role as agents of regional planning and development. In the context of the refugee crisis, unions have increasingly sought the support of donor agencies and international organisations to conduct development projects. Lebanon’s legal framework, however, disempowers unions to develop urban and rural masterplans, and they lack capacity to fully benefit from such assistance and expertise to fulfil their planning functions.

Unions’ regional planning role, which cannot be taken up by the central government or municipalities, is acknowledged in the Municipal Act. The law stipulates that unions, rather than municipalities, must maintain an engineering department, crucial for planning. However, the law also has an element of centralisation, decreeing that planning must be executed in coordination and approval with the Ministry of Public Works and Transport’s Directorate General for Urban Planning (DGUP). This centralisation was further bolstered by the 1983 Urban Planning Act, which allowed the DGUP to unilaterally develop a master plan and submit it to the approval of the concerned local authorities within a one-month period before it becomes effective.

While operating and administrative costs are not solely impacted by salaries, it is noteworthy that the running costs of unions do not always correlate with staff levels or the size of total revenues (Fig.19). As a rule, the lower the running costs, the more efficient a government is. In Lebanon, unions’ average operating expenditure is within acceptable standards, below 40 percent, except for those in Mount-Lebanon.
Lack of urban planning know-how in most local authorities and the absence of an engineering department in 37 percent of the unions has caused the balance of power to tilt to the advantage of the central government. In the rare case where the DGUP’s proposition would be challenged by the local authority, the Council of Ministers has the mandate to settle the disagreement, most likely in the DGUP’s favour.

The disempowering character of this legal framework is reflected on the ground. At least 66 percent of unions do not have a rural or urban master plan (Fig. 20). Municipalities seem to fare better in this regard, with 55 percent reportedly having a master plan (Fig. 21). These trends indicate that planning is mainly confined to the municipal level, and not scaled up to the regional one, as it should be.

It is therefore not surprising that only 22.5 percent of unions viewed their planning capacity as a strength (Fig. 4). More interestingly, only 10.2 percent of unions listed the lack of strategic planning as a weakness (Fig. 5). This indicates either a lack of awareness regarding the importance of strategic development or scepticism toward its relevance given unions’ challenges to carry out basic functions.

Among the unions that reported having a master plan, 87 percent said these were aligned with the National Master Plan of the Lebanese Territory adopted by the central government in 2009. In practice, the implementation of these plans is stymied by the interference of politicians or politically connected real estate lobbies that seek to influence the price of land in its favour to optimise its profits, at the expense of spatial planning regulations.

The failures of implementing plans are illustrated by the issue of building permits, with only 31 percent of surveyed unions saying building permits were issued in compliance to a master plan (Fig. 23). Interestingly, 35 percent of unions said the question was not applicable, referring either to the absence of an engineering department or the unions’ incapacity to process permit requests.
In a further gap in planning, only 8 percent of surveyed unions said they discussed and dispose of enough funds for an Emergency Preparedness Plan (Fig. 23). There is, however, no data as to whether these unions are effectively able to carry out this plan during an emergency.

This low emergency preparedness among unions can be explained by lack of funds and specialised expertise, and understaffing. An emergency plan requires high institutional capacities and a network of relationships with the state’s security agencies, hospitals and the Red Cross/Crescent, which unions often do not have.

Project planning and implementation face a similar challenge. 45 percent of unions responding to the survey rated their project management skills as weak or completely lacking while 38 percent of unions were confident in their skills in this regard.

This comes as donor agencies and international organisations have sought to establish partnerships with unions and conduct joint development and infrastructure projects. According to the survey, 45 percent of unions listed cooperation with international and local organisations as an opportunity, ranked highest in this category. With the increase of foreign funding in support of local and central government institutions to handle the refugee crisis, elected local officials have demonstrated the willingness to coordinate with local civil society organisations, ministries and neighbouring municipal unions.

While elected officials are banking on foreign funding and assistance programmes to improve their situation, the survey shows that they are not fully capable of processing this assistance. This calls for sustained capacity development and institutional strengthening of unions.

Unions should be given the necessary assistance and expertise to plan and develop their own solutions for local issues. Cooperation opportunities exist in the fields of waste management and local economic development. For example, donor organisations could support unions to introduce environmentally sustainable waste management strategies. Also, donor organisations could assist in projects such as eco-tourism, promotion of cultural and religious heritage as well as broader efforts such as aiding the development of industrial policies and promoting agribusiness.

Whatever their scale, the implementation of development projects requires a minimal command of Project Cycle Management (PCM) skills accompanied by adequate leadership and managerial skills. Development projects also requires staffers with specialised technical knowledge, be it in waste management, social stability or another field.

Moreover, project implementation requires a smooth working relationship between unions and central government agencies, local civil society, and to a lesser extent, municipalities which often receive part of the project funding. This can be a challenging modus operandi, especially since union salaries for full-time employees are not attractive to PCM professionals and hiring processes are drawn out. As a result, unions resort to hiring external consultants who are remunerated on a project-by-project basis.

Training civil servants to take on project management responsibilities is not the most effective solution, as it would increase the workload of civil servants amid endemic understaffing. However, training could help these staffers assist external Project Cycle Management professionals in the execution of projects.

Figure 23. Emergency Plans in Municipal Unions
4.6 Citizen Participation and Access to Information

Transparency and information-sharing remain a sticking point among elected local officials. Less than seven percent of surveyed unions identified transparency as a source of strength. This score is particularly low given that Lebanese law requires unions to publicise information such as council decisions, budgets and other financial and administrative data.

While the Municipal Act (Art. 45, 55 and 76) and the Access to Information law (No. 28, issued on 10 February 2017) require unions to publish information (decisions, budgets, financial statements, awarded tenders), most elected local officials are sceptical about the publication of their work, signalling a lack of trust between unions and residents. Union officials often argue that residents, civil society actors and opposition groups could take advantage of transparency laws to question their performance and stir controversies.

Even among the unions that boast their transparent governance style, it is not confirmed whether their understanding of transparency translates into regular publication of public information, as stipulated in the law. Instead, unions report that they prefer to provide documents upon written request. These are usually processed slowly and not always fulfilled. Public financial documents are often perceived as containing “sensitive” information and rarely granted.

But there are exceptions. The unions of Dannieh (North-Lebanon) and Jabal El-Sheikh (Beqaa) generally publish their decisions in a systematic manner. At the municipal level, Zahlé and Barbara are among the recent implementers of the Access to Information Law.

Beyond information-sharing, specialised committees that engage local communities by including residents can play an important role in supporting the policymaking and executive functions of unions. However, they are not commonly deployed and often consist of people already serving the unions.

While the Municipal Act requires unions to create tender and acquisition committees, 37 percent of surveyed unions function without either. This signals an incomplete basic institutionalisation in these unions. In addition, Article 53 of the Municipal Act entitles unions to form specialised, task-specific, committees open to union staff members as well as experts, community actors and volunteers of all backgrounds.

These committees assume an advisory role in policymaking and are intended to support unions in a wide array of activities, including strategic planning, emergency response and technical input. These committees can serve as flexible and powerful tools to engage and build trust with the community and can help compensate for endemic understaffing within unions, providing needed support and assistance. Establishing and managing such committees, however, requires a leadership style within the union council that acknowledges the benefits of participatory governance.

Unions are largely reluctant to seek the assistance of specialised committees that are not expressly mandated by law. The Public Works Committee, which is the most common of these “optional” committees, exists in 61 percent of surveyed unions. Others, such as committees for environment, health and monitoring, are less prevalent (Fig. 24).

The composition of specialised committees reveals unions’ reluctance to engage the community and seek input from citizens not serving within the unions’ bureaucracy. The majority (90 percent) of surveyed unions include their own members in the committees, while only 18 percent involved outsiders. In unions within the Akkar and Beqaa governorates, non-members are not involved at all.

None of the 9 surveyed unions that include non-members in task-specific committees listed such community engagement as a strength. This signals that elected officials perceive community engagement as offering minor potential or even a threat to effective decision-making.

This calls for a more inclusive and participatory governance at the union level, especially since residents are not necessarily registered to vote in these areas. In Lebanon, citizens’ place of voter registration is inherited at birth from their father’s place of registration. As such, specialised committees involving residents can bridge the gap between residents who are entitled to vote and those who are not. These committees could take the form of shadow, or youth, councils, as well as neighbourhood or volunteer committees.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task-Specific Committees in Municipal Unions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tenders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquisitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procurement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Works</td>
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<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
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<td>Agriculture</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>Financial Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information</td>
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<td>External Relations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oversight/Monitoring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Legal Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technical Affairs [Engineering]</td>
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<td>Tourism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forestry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 24. Task-Specific Committees in Municipal Unions
VNG International is the International Cooperation Agency of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG).

VNGI is actively involved in European and worldwide networks of local government organisations. Between 2016 and 2018, VNGI implemented the Local Government Resilience Programme (LOGOReP) in Lebanon, in assignment of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

http://vngi.nl/

Democracy Reporting International (DRI) is a non-partisan, independent, not-for-profit organisation registered in Berlin, Germany. DRI promotes political participation of citizens, accountability of state bodies and the development of democratic institutions world-wide. DRI helps find local ways of promoting the universal right of citizens to participate in the political life of their country, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

http://www.democracy-reporting.org

This publication is based on the capacity assessment of Lebanese Unions of Municipalities, implemented by VNG International in the context of the Local Government Resilience Program (LOGOReP). All activities were funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, which holds all copy rights on the capacity assessment and the original publication.

http://www.logorep.nl/